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The Theology of Redemption Mirrored in the Byzantine Hymns

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Abstract

Jesus Christ, our Saviour, has carried out His redemptive activity on several levels: in heaven – as pre-existing Logos; on earth – from His incarnation up to His crucifixion and burial; in hell – as victorious King, while His Body was in the grave; in heaven again, in His body glorified after His Resurrection and Ascension; and, finally, from a sacramental perspective, as Eucharistic Christ and invisibly participating to the Holy Mysteries – in the Church. Our Saviour’s redeeming activity has three aspects: ontological, directed to human nature itself; summative, directed to the mankind of all times and to the whole creation; and the aspect of offering given to the Father, by which the submission and obedience rejected by Adam were realized. The hymns of the most important liturgical books used in the Orthodox Church emphasize the fact that our Saviour Jesus Christ is present in the Church through all His three missions: His mission of bishop (priest), related to His sacrifice on the Cross and lying at the heart of His redeeming activity (Lenten Triodyon hymns, characteristic for the seven-week period that precedes Easter); His mission of teacher, preaching the Gospel (Octoechos hymns, sung throughout the year, except for the period of the Tryodion and the Pentecostarion), and His mission of king, related to His defeating death, His resurrection and His ascension to heaven (Pentecostarion hymns, characteristic for the period beginning with Easter and ending with the first Sunday after the Descent of the Holy Spirit).

Keywords

redemption, ontological, sacrifice, summative, Church hymns

The hymns of the most important liturgical books used in the Orthodox Church (*Octoechos*, *Lenten Triodyon* and *Pentecostarion*) highlight the fact that Jesus Christ, our Saviour, is present in the Church through His three ministries, by which He has accomplished our salvation. We have in view His ministry as an *archbishop* (*priest*) -by which He sacrificed Himself on the Cross for us - which is at the heart of His redeeming activity (the *Lenten Triodyon* hymns); His mission as a *teacher* preaching the Gospel (the *Octoechos* hymns), and His service as a *leader* or *king*, by which He defeated death, was resurrected and then He Ascended to heaven (the *Pentecostarion* hymns), leading the Church founded through “His own blood” (Acts 20:28). These missions of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, are symbolically recalled during the three great liturgical year periods named after the liturgical books used most during the divine service.

As a *Prophet*, our Saviour Jesus Christ is the “Truth” (John 14:6) Who has made the will of God fully clear to mankind. By His incarnation, the Logos spoke to people under the appearance of a man. The Word of God makes the Kingdom of God known to people, speaking to them - not like in the Old Testament, through His prophets or by means of other holy fathers chosen by God - but speaking to them He Himself, as a human being.

“Because the Word - being simple and without a body, and spiritually nourishing all the creatures in heaven, according to their hierarchy - accepted to take on a body, and through His coming in the body from us, for us and like us, yet with no sin, He willed to depict to us, in a way we could understand, through words and examples, the teaching about the things that cannot be depicted by words, which go beyond the power of all word.”¹

By the incarnated Word of God, the Revelation becomes perfect, not just through His words, but through His own Person. He is the “Truth” (John 14:6) and “the Light of the World” (John 8:12) Who has shown Himself in a human body for us to understand the meaning of life. And this happened so that He Who is the spiritual light may chase away the darkness of ignorance and so that He Who is the hypostatic power of God may

¹ Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua. Tâlcuiri ale unor locuri cu adânci înțelesuri din Sfinții Dionisie Areopagitul și Grigorie Teologul*, translated by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, in col. „P.S.B.”, vol. 80, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1983, p. 247.

destroy the latches of sin and free the nature of those who were terribly imprisoned by the evil one, giving them the everlasting light of the real knowledge and the unshakable power of virtues.

The incarnated Logos, our Saviour Jesus Christ, has revealed in Himself the mystery of His incarnation – which had been hidden to people for centuries. He makes Himself the messenger of God's plan to save mankind, a plan conceived by God since eternity.

“This is the mystery encompassing all the centuries and bringing to light the super-infinite council of God, which had existed since infinites or since the infinite, before the centuries. And its messenger was the Word of God Himself, by turning Himself into a man. As He has revealed, if we may say so, the deepest profundity of the Father's goodness, and He has shown in Himself the purpose for which the creatures have received the beginning of their existence.”²

Being the “Truth” and the “True Light giving light to every man that comes into the world” (John 1:9), Jesus Christ our Saviour first taught us through the example of His Own Life. Then, taking on a body and in order to become the Teacher of mankind, He had to become the perfect Teacher, combining the word with love, and He did so because He is the “Knower of our hearts“:

“You, Lover of people, when You have revealed Yourself on Earth according to the ineffable divine plan, O Jesus Christ, our Lord, hearing Your word, the Samaritan woman left her bucket near the fountain and ran quickly, telling the people from her borough: Come and see the *Knower of all hearts*; could This be the Christ Whom we have been waiting for, He Who has great mercy on all of us?”³

The restoration of God's image in man was not accomplished by our Saviour only by miracles, or only by His suffering on the Cross, but through His entire activity carried out while He was in a human body; so, also by means of virtues, and this is His main accomplishment, namely *the*

² Idem, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, in “Filocalia românească“, vol. 3, (60), translated by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Sibiu, 1948, p. 331-332.

³ *Penticostar*, ediția a VIII-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1999, Duminica Samaritencii, Slava... de la stihoavnă, p. 180.

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example of His life. Referring, for instance, to the doctrine of the Logos - the hymnographers firmly and clearly emphasize that the divine knowledge He has spread in the world *has renewed it and has deified the people*. In our Saviour's work as a Prophet and as a Teacher, they see a really essential part of God's plan regarding man's restoration. This deep meaning includes the teaching of our Saviour, in all its details; the Logos has assumed the responsibility of being "the Light of the World" (John 8:12), which light is nothing but a share of His own substance of light (John 1:5): "O Lord, my Light, You have come into the world, You, *Holy Light, saving from the darkness of ignorance* those who faithfully praise You."⁴

The climax of the redemptive activity our Saviour Jesus Christ is His sacrifice on the Cross. The Holy Cross was best prefigured – beside all the other symbols prefiguring it – by the tree of life in Eden:

*"In the middle of Eden, the wood of the tree blossomed death, and in the middle of Earth, the wood of the Cross yielded life; because, by tasting the first fruit, we – who had once been immortal – became mortal; but, by obtaining the second fruit, we benefit of immortality, as Jesus Christ has saved mankind by means of the Cross."*⁵

What happened before the Cross therefore represents a "preparation" of it, and what has happened after it is a continuation of the Cross. "Thus, His Cross is set at the entrance of our new life."⁶ The sacrifice of our Saviour Jesus Christ has an infinite saving power both for man and for the universe. For this reason, from the very beginning up to now, it has had a central place in the Orthodox divine service, due to its obviously overwhelming importance, an importance that He Who sacrificed Himself for us highlighted when He instituted the Mysterious Supper, by means of the words: "Do this in remembrance of Me." (Luke 22:19). Therefore, the Cross is at the heart of the Christian's religious life and just as Jesus' redemptive sacrifice is the spring of all the gifts, similarly its continuation in the Holy Liturgy is at the heart of Jesus Christ's activity in the Orthodox

⁴ *Mineiul pe octombrie*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, ed. a V-a, București, 1983, în 8 zile: oda a V-a, imrosul, p. 96.

⁵ *Octoiul Mare*, ed. a VI-a, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1975, glasul al VIII-lea, slujba de vineri la Utrenie, după catisma a II-a, sedelna a 2-a, p. 714.

⁶ Lot-Borodine, *La grace deifiante*, în „Revue des Sciences philosophiques et théologiques“, année 1935, p. 307.

Church. For this reason, it is towards it that the most exquisite expressions and inflections of the human voice have turned their attention, in all the divine services of the Church but especially during the Holy Liturgy.⁷

All the hymns depicting the Passions and the death of our Saviour help us realize their intensity and the frightening form of the Lord's suffering - beyond any imagination -, able to shake the sky and the Earth from their foundations, as it was necessary, to create a new form of existence for the creation that had come out of its original pathway.⁸

The sacrifice on the cross is also the supreme expression of suffering, because, by it, the Son of God and - at the same time - Son of Man accepted to see Himself abandoned even by God the Father. Thus, His Sacrifice was able to shake, in a restoring way, every creature, and, as a continuation, on the Holy Altars, it has perpetuated this quake of deep spiritual transformation for the faithful Christians. In this sense, the canticles state:

*“By Your wound, heal the sinful passions of my soul, by Your pierced rib – calm the painful incitements of the devils, by the nails You received in Your hands and feet, O Jesus Christ, take out the nails of my sinful desires...”*⁹

The Sacrifice of our Saviour had to extend its life-bringing power over His human nature (the ontological aspect) and over all the people, of all times and even over the sighing nature that had been waiting to be freed from its slavery to corruptibility (summative aspect)¹⁰.

The Church Hymns constantly highlight the voluntary character of Jesus Christ's Sacrifice. The Holy Bible emphasizes that God the Father has sent His Only-Begotten Son to the world, to save mankind; this indicates the inter-Trinitarian communion, in which the Word is the Trinitarian Person representing especially the obedience and meekness in relation to the Person of the Father, in freedom and in love, which turns Him into the heavenly model of man – the uncreated Man, so that we may say that the Son of God took on a human body based on a harmony between Him and the human person.¹¹

⁷ Dr. V. Mitrofanovici, *Liturgica Bisericii Ortodoxe*, Cernăuți, 1929, p. 497.

⁸ Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, ed. I, Sibiu, 1943, p. 88.

⁹ *Triod*, ed. a IX-a, Edit. Instit.Biblic..., București, București, 2000, miercuri, a 4-a săptămână a Postului Mare, la Utrenie, oda a IX-a, Tricântarea, stihira a 3-a, p. 346.

¹⁰ Hristu Andruș, *Dogmatica Bisericii Ortodoxe Răsăritene*, translated by Pr. Prof. Dumitru Stăniloae, Sibiu, 1930, p. 219.

¹¹ Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 77-80.

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Indeed, for man's salvation to be real, so that it may clothe the mortal man adorning him with incorruptibility¹², Jesus Christ really had to be man and God, and His Passions, death and resurrection had to be concrete realities. And the Church, in its divine services - which mean living and feeling these realities - tells us that this is really the truth. For instance, extraordinarily expressively, the liturgical books of the Orthodox Church affirm the reality of our Lord's Passions in every detail of the pains:

*"Each limb of Your Holy Body has endured disrespect for our sake: Your head - the thorns; Your face - the spitting; Your cheek - the slapping; Your mouth - the taste of the sour vinegar mixed with the bitter gall; Your ears - the pagan blasphemies; Your back - the whipping, and Your hand - the reed; Your body - the stretching on the cross; Your bone joints - the nails, and Your rib - the spear..."*¹³

Here is the shout of pain of the whole creation in front of His crucifixion: "Today they hang on wood the One Who hung the Earth on water..."¹⁴

The Archpriest according to the hierarchy of Melchizedek has brought Himself as a sacrifice once and for all, as Saint Paul the Apostle writes in his letter to the Hebrews (Book of Hebrews 7:27; 9:11, 14). Based on the same letter, and partly with the same words, the canticle of the Orthodox Church says:

*"Jesus Christ, showing Himself as the Archpriest of the future joy, has cleaned away our sins and has drawn our attention to an unearthly way by means of His Blood, and has entered the best and most perfect tent (the Holy of Holies), being our fore-runner in all the holy things..."*¹⁵

The Sacrifice of our Saviour has not had a juridical character and has not been meant as an exchange act, as equivalence between sin and punishment, but it has had an ontological value, being meant to restore the image of God in man. The Sacrifice of the incarnated Logos is based on His endless love for the man created in His image: "To turn man into god, You, have turned Yourself into a man, Most Good One, and have let Yourself be crucified. Glory to Your power!"¹⁶

¹² *Penticostar*, Duminica Învierii, catavasia la oda a VII-a, p. 20.

¹³ *Triod*, Joia Mare, la slujba Sfințelor Patimi, stihira a 2-a de la laude, p. 617.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, antifonul 15, primultropar, p. 610.

¹⁵ *Octoiuhul Mare*, glasul I, duminică la Utrenie, oada IV-a, canonul II, stihira a 2-a, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, glasul al VII-lea, joi, la Vecernie, prima stihira de la „Doamne, strigat-am“, p. 619.

Our Saviour lets Himself be defeated by death, so that He may then conquer it. The moment when death seemed to be victorious, it was defeated by the Son of God, “because it was not possible for Him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24). Thus, the death of our Saviour Jesus Christ marked His victory over death. The incarnated Logos, the Son of Man “right when His historical life comes to an end, immediately emerges in the life of the other existence.”¹⁷ Thus, by the death of our Saviour, people’s death - in general - acquires a new dimension. From a punishment instrument for human nature because of sin, death becomes a punishment for sin, restoring human nature and opening the way to eternal life.

By His mission of Archbishop (*priest*), Jesus Christ our Lord has freed us from the “dominion of darkness” and has reconciled us with God. Yet, with their fine theological depth, the hymnographers notice that the salvation achieved by the incarnated Son of God also has a cosmic dimension and does not concern only man. The Universe created by the Logos has its reason and is a means of communication between man and God, through its contemplation by man. Also, the cosmos sighs for being saved from under the dominion of corruptibility, in order to attain the glory of the sons of God (Romans 8:20). For this reason, as Maximus the Confessor highlights, first He has united us with ourselves in Himself, cancelling the difference between man and woman, and then He has embraced the whole creation, uniting Heaven and Earth around Him. By this, our Saviour Jesus Christ has shown the transfiguration of a new sky and a new Earth¹⁸, and has indicated that the whole creation is repeated and redeemed in Him.

After the terrible abandonment of the Son by the Father, at the moment of the crucifixion, according to God’s divine plan of salvation, the Father embraces His Son and the Son’s victory, this time in a new and amazing inter-Trinitarian relation. Jesus the Man, Who is the same with the Son of God, born in a human body on Earth, and brotherly united with the people in all the human things except sin, is seated at the right side of the Father - and by Him our real nature is seated on the throne of God, and rules the world¹⁹. This is why, in the theological prayer of the Holy Liturgy, the priest says: “You have lifted us to heaven and have given us

¹⁷ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 322-323.

¹⁸ Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua* (106), p. 265-266; Cf. Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Popescu, *Ortodoxie și contemporaneitate*, București, 1996, p. 67-68.

¹⁹ Pr. Prof. D. Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 352-353.

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Your Kingdom.”²⁰ Jesus Christ has united with Himself forever the body taken from the body of Virgin Mary, so that our human nature, which had once fallen, was seated on the divine throne, which is beyond all thoughts, and the angels, seeing His deified body, were wondering: “What is this appearance? Because, according to the image, it is a human, and yet He rises over the skies like a God, in His human body.”²¹

The *royal* mission of Jesus Christ, our Lord, is contained in His quality of Creator and Providential Logos and Judge of the world. In the hymnographers’ large vision on God and the world, the Incarnation of the Logos is an act of Providence. He descends to the world, out of love for it, to correct its wandering and to lead it to the aim for which it had been created, as He Himself is the Providence, being the One Who supports all things and the Care Taker of the things under His supervision. The divine Logos is also “the king of nature”²² since the creation, through the natural law, written down in the creatures. By His care, He keeps the created world in existence, and at the same time leads and guides it to its final aim. This is why the divine Logos has come to the world through Incarnation, teaching that His kingdom “is not of this world” (John 18:36) but the world must follow Him to His kingdom. This is why the mystery of God’s Incarnation was an ineffable way of acting of the Providence.

The kingly mission of Jesus Christ, our Saviour, was noticeable while He has lived His earthly life as well, yet not as an emperor of this world but in a supreme way. He proved His imperial dignity, by the miracles He made and by the acts of power through which He freed those who faithfully came to Him from their sins. Nevertheless, this mission was best highlighted by the act of His Soul’s descent to hell, from where, by His victorious Resurrection, He has defeated the evil’s power and has freed those who had been waiting there and hoping for their resurrection. Because “our Saviour has descended to hell to save the dead who had believed in Him, as well.”²³

The descent to hell is a fundamental Truth of faith, recognized *ab initio* (from the beginning) by the whole Eastern and Western Church. It had

²⁰ *Liturghier*, editionedited by Pr. Prof. Dr. Nicolae D. Necula, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 2000, p. 160.

²¹ *Penticostar*, Joia Înălțării Domnului, la Utrenie, stihira a 2-a de la laude, p. 259.

²² Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, p. 397.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

deeply entered the conscience of the primary Church, through the apostolic catechesis. References to this issue are often met in the *Old Testament*, such as: Ps. 6:5; 15:10; 29:3; 48:16; 73:24; 75:13; 106:16; 138:7; Isaiah 24:22; 49:19; Daniel 12:1-3; Hosea 13:14; Zechariah 9:11; Malachi 2:17; 3:15-16; etc.; also, in the *New Testament*, references are made to this idea in: Mathew 12:39-40; 24:52-53; Luke, 23:43; (16:22-23); John 5:25, 29; Acts 2:24-25; Rom. 8:3-17; 10:6-9; 1 Cor. 15:24 sqq.; Ephes. 1:21-22; 4:8-10; Philip. 2:10; Col. 1:18; Hebrews 9:39 sqq.; 12:23 etc.

The patristic literature has studied this problem, which has been dealt with under all its aspects by the Holy Fathers and by old and new exegetes, though they have not analyzed it separately. This Truth of faith has also become part of the symbols of faith and the credos of the Orthodox and Roman-Catholic Churches. At the time of the great heresies, the Holy Fathers used this dogmatic Truth of Jesus Christ's descend to hell in His soul united with the Divinity, or in His "deified soul"²⁴ to fight and condemn the followers of Arius at that moment, and the followers of Apolinarius and the Docetists, afterwards, who refused to recognize a human soul in the incarnated Word (Logos). "If the soul is physical – says Saint Athanasius the Great to the followers of Apolinarius – why does it not die at the same time with the body, and why does Peter say, calling the souls in the prison of hell "spirits": "Jesus Christ descended to the spirits in prison to bring to them the news of Resurrection?"²⁵

The western Church introduced this dogma in the fifth article of faith, in the sentence: "Descendit ad inferos" (He descended to hell), which can be found, for the first time, in the "Apostolic Symbol of Faith" (during the 4th century) and then in the "Athanasian Symbol of Faith" (given to Saint Athanasius the Great, during the 4th century)²⁶; this phrase "has gradually become part of the Credo of the Roman Church, being generalized throughout the Western Church, since the 8th century."²⁷

²⁴ Sf. Chiril al Alexandriei, *Fragmenta in Epistolam I B, Petri*, P.G., t. LXXIV, col. 1013; Idem, *Omilia III Pascalis*, P.G., t. LXXVII, col. 449 B; Sfântul Ioan Damaschin, *Dogmatica*, translated by Dumitru Fecioru, București, 1938, p. 231.

²⁵ Sfântul Atanasie cel Mare, *Contra Apolinarium II*, P.G., t. XXVI, col. 1145 AB; Idem, *Oratio III contra Arianos*, P.G., t. XXVI, col. 396-400.

²⁶ Hristu Andruș, *Simbolica* translated by Prof. Justin Moisescu, Editura Centrului Metropolitan al Olteniei, 1955, p. 23, 25, 32.

²⁷ Josef Turnel, *La Descente du Christ aux enfers*, Paris, 1908, p. 11; H. Quilliet, *La Descente de Jésus aux enfers*, in « Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique », IX, col. 565.

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It has also become part of the divine service of the Orthodox Church. For instance:

“The Divinity of Jesus Christ was one: in hell and in the grave and in Heaven - undivided, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for our salvation, of us who are singing: O, Saviour, O, our Lord, You are blessed.”²⁸

The canticles of the Church see Jesus Christ's victory over hell as hell's incapacity of holding Him. Hell received Jesus within its dominion, not knowing the power hidden in the One it was receiving. But, once in hell, the power of Jesus burst into all its glory, breaking the “coppery” gates of hell. This event has a great spiritual - not material - significance. Jesus did not break material gates and did not break walls surrounding an area. Had it been so, any soul from hell could have come out of it and it would no longer be a reality for the people who have died in sin ever since and will die in sin in the future.²⁹

“You have descended in the deepest depths of the Earth and have broken the eternal locks, which used to keep imprisoned those who had been bound, O Christ; and on the third day, just like the prophet Jonah from inside the whale, You have come out of the grave, resurrected.”³⁰

As a conclusion, Jesus Christ's descent to hell - in His deified soul, or in His soul united with God - is one of His many activities as a Saviour. But He has gone to hell neither as a Master, nor as a prophet aiming to preach and to convert the unfaithful, nor as a Self-sacrificing Archbishop (*priest*), as those activities ended at the moment of His redeeming sacrifice on the cross. So, He went there as a winning Emperor. It is He Who has defeated death, sin, hell and the devil, being the Saviour of those unfairly imprisoned there.³¹

Our Saviour's victory over death and His *Resurrection* - after having spent three days having His body in the grave - had been prophesied

²⁸ *Penticostar*, utrenia Învierii, oda a VII-a, stihira a 4-a, p. 11; *Idem*, ceasurile Sfințelor Paști, p. 27; *Liturghier*, p. 153; *Octoiul Mare*, glasul al IV-lea, duminică, canonul Învierii, oda I, stihira a 2-a, p. 293.

²⁹ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Stăniloae, *Iisus Hristos sau restaurarea omului*, p. 335.

³⁰ *Penticostar*, canonul Învierii, oda a VI-a, irmosul, p. 18.

³¹ Pr. Ioan Mircea, *Coborârea în iad a lui Iisus Hristos*, in “Studii Teologice”, XXIV (1972), nr. 3-4, p. 249.

by the three days spent by the prophet Jonah inside the whale.³² “*Jonah the Prophet, prefiguring Your three-day burial*, shouted his prayer inside the whale: save me from corruptibility, You, Jesus, King of the heavenly powers.”³³

The joy of defeating the evil one, of breaking the gates of Hell and of opening the gates of the Kingdom of God, by Resurrection, for the whole humanity, bursts out from the very first words of Jesus, addressed to His Apostles after rising from the grave: “Rejoice!” (Mathew 28:9).

It is to the liturgical celebration of this Easter joy that the grand, unique and deep hymns of the Resurrection from the night of the “celebration of light and joy” are dedicated. In the hymns of the Holy Easter, the credo is written down in the most eloquent and harmonious forms of the hymnographic poetry:

“Seeing Jesus’ Resurrection, let us worship our Holy Jesus, our Lord, He Who is the One without sin; we worship Your Cross, O Jesus Christ, and we praise and glorify Your Holy Resurrection; as You are our only Lord, we know no other except You, and it is Your Holy name we call. O come, all you faithful, let us worship the Holy Resurrection of our Christ. Because, through His Cross, joy has come to the whole world. Always blessing our Lord, we glorify His Resurrection, as, by enduring crucifixion for the sake of our salvation, by His death, he crushed our death.”

Thus, the joy of Resurrection is not noisy gaiety but an outburst of peace in the depths of the human being, and in the relation between the believer and his fellows, as it is known that sin and death have been defeated by Jesus Christ for all of us.

We must emphasize that, for the hymnographers, Jesus’ Resurrection is not a simple “rising from the dead” of a dead man, as in the case of Jairus’ daughter, or the son of the widow of Nain or, even more strikingly, the case of Lazarus - Jesus’ friend, no matter how super-humane such miracles may be. The rising from the dead – in all those cases – did not settle the body of the risen person in a condition that was different from that prior to death. According to the hymnographers, and to the Holy Bible, as well, a

³² Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Răspunsuri către Talasie*, p. 410.

³³ *Mineiul pe martie*, Edit. Instit. Biblic..., ed. a V-a, București, 1976, Utrenia din ziua a 25-a, la canoane, cântarea a VI-a, imnosul, p. 200.

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deep transformation of our Saviour's Body happens³⁴, by Resurrection, so that He becomes able to go through locked doors, overcoming the chronological-spatial limits. In this respect, the testimonies of the canticle composers are quite numerous: "*You have come, O Lord, with the un-shadowed glory of Your Divinity, although the doors were locked...*"³⁵

The resurrected body of Jesus is diaphane, "spiritual" σωμαπνευματικόν - as Saint Paul, the Apostle says (1 Cor. 15:44) - not an ordinary body, but the spiritual body *par excellence*, the earthly, natural, mortal body transfigured by the Holy Spirit - which does not cancel flesh, but totally animates. The difficulty of the Occident in accepting this holy mystery comes from the fact that it remained too Platonist, faithful to the impoverished meaning of this word, namely from the fact that they opposed "spirit", to "matter", intelligible to sensitive, and so they have become unable to understand the "pneumatic" character of Jesus' resurrected body, or by "spiritual body" they have understood a personal dematerialized existence. From this point to the interpretation of the appearances of the resurrected Jesus as simply subjective, there is just one step. But the Spirit - Breath and Fire of God - transcends the creation - body and soul - transforming it altogether - body and soul. The Body of Jesus is not dematerialized, or denied, but animated by the life of the Holy Trinity, itself, and deified by the work of the Holy Spirit.

He still keeps His wounds in His body - as a permanent source of His love, as evidence that the Resurrected One is no other but He Who has let Himself be crucified for us. If He were different, His Resurrection and our future resurrection would not be based on His love, and we would not be made ready for it either through our love for Him; it would be an act of magic, not one of spiritual accomplishment: "Keeping Your wounds - O Christ - the wounds that You have willingly endured for us, You have shown them to Your disciples - as evidence of Your glorious Resurrection."³⁶

The hymns of St. Thomas Sunday provide some inestimable clarifications on the resurrected body of our Saviour. The unfaithful Apostle Tho-

³⁴ Arhim. Benedict Ghiuș, *Taina răscumpărării în inmografia ortodoxă*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1998, p. 178.

³⁵ *Penticostar*, miercuri în săptămâna a II-adupă Paști, Slavă... Și acum..., de la „Doamne, strigat-am“, p. 73.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, DuminicaTomii, la Utrenie, cântarea a III-a de la canon, stihira a 3-a, p. 60.

mas feels the scars of the wounds in His rib, which proves that He keeps His body forever. But this body is burning like fire and it is the mildness of our Saviour that protects Thomas from getting burnt while touching Him. The fire of purity, love and spiritual wealth of Jesus' soul, full of the Holy Spirit of His Divinity raises our bodies to the condition of fire and light, as well. If the light on Moses' face was so bright that the Jews could not look at him - and for this reason Moses had to keep his face covered by a veil (2 Cor. 3:13) - if the light of Jesus' face on Mount Tabor shone like the Sun and filled His three disciples with awe (Mark 9:6; Luke 9:34), how much brighter must have been the light of Jesus' resurrected body? Yet, Thomas' hand, although divinely protected against burning, still felt the divine power emanating from the Lord's body:

“Who is He Who protected the hand of the disciple against burning, when he got close to the Lord's fiery rib? Who gave this [Thomas's] hand the boldness to feel the burning bone? - Only the rib that was being touched. Because, if that rib had not empowered the right hand made of clay, how could that hand have felt the scars of the Passions that made the heavenly and earthly creatures shake? Thomas was given the gift to feel it and to say to Jesus: My Lord and my God!”³⁷

Following the evidence of the physical scars, Thomas believed that Jesus Himself had been resurrected in His body. But he believed that Jesus had been resurrected, not simply because of the resurrection of a human body like ours. Because, in that case, he could have considered that Jesus had not been resurrected, indeed, but had been restored to His Earthly life, or perhaps He had not died. Nevertheless, he believed because his own hand felt the twofold nature of our Saviour: “...*And Thomas - his hand feeling Your twofold nature - fearfully and deeply faithfully cried: My Lord and my God, glory to Thee!*”³⁸

In his whole body, Thomas felt a thrill when feeling Jesus' rib. Because in this way he did not feel just the human warmth of His rib but also the divine work springing from it, and he felt this power much more intensely than the woman who had been subject to bleeding:

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Duminica Tomii, la Utrenie, icosul, p. 61.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, miercuri în săptămâna a II-adupă Paști, Slavă... Și acum..., de la „Doamne, strigat-am“, p. 73.

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“When Thomas fearfully put his hand into Your life-bearing rib, O Christ, being thrilled, he felt - O our Saviour - the twofold work of Your two natures, that were together in You but not mixed - and faithfully he cried out: You are my Lord, Most High One, God of our Fathers and of ourselves, may You be blessed!”³⁹

This is how Thomas perceives God, resurrected as a human, not only by seeing but also by touching Him. He added a new foundation, a new experience of the divinity of the resurrected Christ to the apostles' testimony and sermon: *“Thomas, your inquisitiveness has opened to us a hidden treasure; because, speaking about God in divinely inspired words, you were saying: Praise and glorify Jesus Christ forever and ever!”⁴⁰*

The Life of Resurrection is the life of completeness, and so, it is the life of full light and it has this feature because it is a life of non-diminished (i.e. abundant) participation to God's life. This is the meaning of taking on His body and Resurrection in the hypostasis of God the Logos. Actually, by assuming our nature, God the Logos has led it to resurrection. All the Passover hymns give evidence about the fact that now - by Jesus' Resurrection - our destination as believers has been revealed, namely eternal life in God, and God has revealed Himself to us as a God of love, who wants to be united with us forever; the destination of our human corruptible bodies has been revealed, being namely their participation to our glory in God; the sense of our acts has also been revealed, as a means and way leading the Christians towards perfection and preparing them for the eternal life. In Jesus' Resurrection, at the same time with our human nature, the whole nature has been reinforced into an eternal incorruptibility.

The resurrected body of Jesus Christ is pneumatized under the force of His deified spirit, through the divine degree of the power of His spirit, and this pneumatization condition spiritualizes it to such an extent that it is no longer experienced as impenetrable object but it is received as a content of His subject - fluid and penetrating - able to embrace the other subjects along with His own spiritual subject: *“Jesus Christ re-enflames His body as a lamp bearing the divine light”*, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor.⁴¹

³⁹ *Ibid.*, DuminicaTomii, la Utrenie, cântarea a VII-a, de la canon, stihira a 4-a, p. 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, DuminicaTomii, la Utrenie, cântarea a VIII-a de la canon, stihira a 3-a, p. 63.

⁴¹ Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul, *Ambigua*, P.G., 91, 1277, apud Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, *Paștile, sărbătoarea luminii în Ortodoxie*, in “Studii Teologice”, XXII (1975), nr. 5-6, p. 355.

The body of Jesus Christ becomes as bright as His divinity or as the divine and deified subject of Jesus Christ.

It is a body that the Light goes through, “a body of glory” into which the “body of our humbleness” is transformed (Philip. 3:21). In Jesus Christ, indeed, “all the wholeness of the divinity *physically* lives” (κατοικει παν το πληρωμα της θεοτητος σωματικως, Col. 2:9). In Him, “the body” of the whole humanity, of the Earth, of the universe really becomes the body of our Saviour. Our Holy Fathers of Alexandria and the Saints of Byzantium say that the resurrected body of Jesus is nothing else but “the body of God.”⁴² This paradoxical expression synthesizes the great “apophatic” antinomy, according to which the living God appears at the same time inaccessible and shareable, never ceasing to be totally different and totally close. Here we need to quote Dionysius: “He Who is above nature leaves His mystery and makes Himself visible by taking on the human nature. And even while He appears to us in this way, or rather - if we were to use a divine language - under this appearance, He still entirely keeps His mystery. Because the mystery of Jesus Christ remains hidden; no reasoning and no understanding can express What He Is Inside. No matter how much one may say about Him, He remains unknown to us. However hard we may try to think about Him, He remains impenetrable.”⁴³ Jesus Christ has appeared to us physically, materialized like any other thing in the world, for the sake of our sensitivity and intelligence, and yet His divine mystery has remained a sealed mystery! God’s Being remains concealed in His Own Incarnation, or, better said, by the Son’s Own Incarnation, Sacrifice, Resurrection and Ascension.⁴⁴

Jesus’ Resurrection – though a historical act – does not belong to the past; it is not a pious memory, but an event happening “today” and “tomorrow”; it is both present and future. It is an event lived in a continuous “now” for each soul coming in the world, according to the meaning of the hymns of the Resurrection Canon: “Yesterday I buried myself with You, O Christ; *today – I rise with You, the Resurrected One.* I let myself crucified

⁴² Sfântul Atanasie al Alexandriei, *Ep. ad. Adelpium*, 3, P.G., 26, 1074. To St. Gregory-Palamassee J. Meyendorff, *Introduction à l’étude de Grégoire Palamas*, Paris, 1959, p. 255-256; Pr. Prof. Dr. D. Stăniloae, *Viața și învățătura Sfântului Grigorie Palama*, Sibiu, 1948.

⁴³ Sfântul Dionisie Pseudo-Areopagitul, *Epistola 3*, in “Oeuvres complètes du Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite”, Paris, 1943, p. 177.

⁴⁴ Olivier Clément, *Mormântul gol*, in “Studii Teologice”, XLVI (1994), nr. 1-3, p. 19.

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with You yesterday: let me share in Your glory in Your kingdom, O my Saviour.”⁴⁵

A new dimension of the kingly mission of Jesus Christ our Saviour is highlighted by the act of His *Ascension* as a human in the glory of the Holy Trinity, from where He guides the divine redemptive action until the end of the ages – when He is to show Himself as an Emperor, to judge the world.

The guarantee of the full deification of the human nature is given to us by the Ascension of our Saviour to heaven, having a body, which at the same time means His perfect glorification, reflected in the words:

“The entire visible and invisible world happily feasts; the angels and the believers jump with joy, forever praising the Ascension of He Who united Himself with us, through His incarnation, out of kindness.”⁴⁶

The Lord’s Ascension is divine, as His body has now become a heavenly body; this is why the angels marvel recognizing the Lord: “When the Saviour ascended, in His body, to the Father, *the armies of angels marvelled at His sight* and said: Glory to Your Ascension, O Christ!”⁴⁷

They marvelled - not because they can see a body similar to that of those who were blessed with a divine rapture to the skies (Enoch and Elijah) but they can see a completely new body. It remains nevertheless our human body, therefore our lost human nature, yet it is now ascended, brought to the Father and seated on His right side: “Let all the peoples sing the victory of Christ, Who has gloriously ascended on the Cherubim’s shoulders, and has seated us, with Him, *on the right side of the Father*, because He was glorified more than anybody else.”⁴⁸

Thus, from this moment on, winning heaven depends on our own will, as well. The way is open as “the gates have been lifted” and “heaven has been opened”: “I have heard, my Lord, the voice of the power of Your Cross, as *heaven was opened* through it, and I have said: Glory to Your power, my Lord!”⁴⁹

The Ascension our Saviour Jesus Christ to heaven means no “separation” from those living on earth: “The pure and praise-worthy mouth said:

⁴⁵ *Penticostar*, canonul Învierii, oda a III-a, stihira a 2-a, p. 16.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, canonul II, cântarea IV-a, stihira a 2-a, p. 252.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, cântarea IV-a, stihira a 2-a, p. 252.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, cântarea IV-a, catavasia, p. 253.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, cântarea IV-a, irmos.

I shall not get separated from you, my friends! Because, co-seated on the high and fatherly chair, I shall pour the gift of the Holy Spirit abundantly, for it to shine on those who want it.”⁵⁰

He remains the first fruit, the model and the author of our Ascension. The accentuation of the fact that our Saviour “has ascended, in His body, to the bodiless Father” does not indicate the introduction of a new principle in the Divinity; it simply highlights that man has been assimilated in the Divinity’s infinity, in the crown with no beginning and no end, which is Jesus Christ: “The low-ranking angels spoke to the higher-ranking ones: *Lift the gates for Jesus Christ, our King, Whom we praise along with the Father and the Holy Spirit.*”⁵¹

The Son descended to man, and then He ascended along with man and remained untransformed, thus closing a crown, a ring in which man was inscribed as well: “We glorify You, Who *descended to the lowest parts of the Earth and saved man, and - by Your Ascension - have lifted him to heaven.*”⁵²

The human nature taken on from Jesus Christ, filled with the Holy Spirit, a nature forever lifted by God, turns itself into an eternal spring from man to his fellows:

“It is fit to praise the life-bearing Virgin Mary; as she was the only one who concealed in her womb the *Word, He Who has healed the suffering human nature; He Who is now seated on a chair on the right side of the Father; He Who has sent to us the gift of His Spirit.*”⁵³

To conclude, the act of the Ascension of our Saviour Jesus Christ to heaven

“meant the supreme deification of His humanity, representing the supreme sensitivity and transparency of the humanity for the Father and for people, because the resurrected and ascended Jesus Christ, in the glory on the right side of the Father (Luke 24:51), as a human, has made fully possible the communication with the Father and with the people, as well. Jesus Christ continues to be, even on the seat of glory, the Man-God, one of us in the Holy

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, canonul Cincizecimii, canonul II, oda I, stihira 1, p. 319.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, cântarea IV-a, stihira a 2-a, p. 252.

⁵² *Ibid.*, canonul Înălțării, cântarea IX-a, stihira a 4-a, p. 258.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, canonul Cincizecimii, canonul al II-lea, cântarea IX-a, stihira 1, p. 325.

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Trinity, sharing - by His deified humanity - the plenitude of the divine life in the Church and in those who participate to the life and work of the Church, which is the Body of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴

By His Incarnation, death on the Cross, Resurrection and Ascension to heaven, Jesus Christ, the incarnated son of God, has completed - in His deified body - the whole plan of God for our objective salvation, which can become a subjective treasure for each one of us – not by the appropriation of a gift separated from Jesus Christ but only by letting Jesus Christ Himself dwell inside us in His resurrected and ascended body, through the Holy Spirit. Thus, the divine person of Jesus Christ is related both to the supreme communion of the Holy Trinity and to its reflexion in the creation. This means that Jesus Christ is always related to the Holy Trinity, and the Holy Trinity reveals itself through Jesus Christ.

⁵⁴ Pr. Prof. Dr. Dumitru Radu and other collaborators, *Îndrumări misionare*, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, București, 1986, p. 332.